

## Mission Statement

The National CASA Association, together with its state and local members, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy for abused and neglected children so that they can thrive in safe, permanent homes.



## After the Storm: Texas CASA Programs Stay Strong Through Hurricane Ike

Hurricane Ike tossed trees, tore roofs and brought down power lines near Lisa Abel's home in Friendswood, TX, last September. When cell phone service was restored a few days later, she was overjoyed to hear from a 16-year-old boy she represents as a CASA volunteer. "He was calling to check up on me," she says. It made sense that someone who had been tossed around by abuse and neglect, who had weathered the storms of the child welfare system, would go straight to the only safe harbor he knew: his CASA volunteer.

Along Galveston Bay, Hurricane Ike destroyed nearly everything in its path. The wind lifted boats from harbors and left them in fields miles away. Roads and buildings disappeared beneath a terrifying 20-foot storm surge. Even inland areas thought to be "high and dry" were drowned by the powerful, slow-moving force of Ike.

By the time the wind died down, five Texas CASA programs had been affected by the powerful storm. Even today, two of those programs—headquartered in Galveston and Orange—are housed in temporary offices, unable to return to damaged buildings.

The minute Ike's floodwaters began to recede, CASA volunteers along the Texas coast began to surface—establishing communication with their CASA kids, checking in with program staff and continuing to advocate as soon as the region's courts came back online.

After the storm, Cathy Cockerham, program operations director for Texas CASA, fielded damage reports from across the region and began to dispatch help. Texas CASA and National CASA sent immediate emergency assistance to programs, but Cockerham says they will need much more—and the need far outstrips their current local fundraising capacity. Still, she says, "the incredible part of this story is that volunteers who lost their homes, who had no electricity and whose lives were disrupted kept their volunteer work going."

Barry Penland is one of those volunteers. While he rode out the storm at work as a campus police officer, his home in San Leon on Galveston Bay filled with seven feet of water. His CASA volunteer case reports and notes, he says, "went by the sea." But his CASA kid's number was programmed into his cell phone so he called right away. Other CASA volunteers

## CASA Programs Survive Other Storms



Louisiana and Mississippi are still feeling the ripple effects of the devastating 2005 hurricane season. John Wyble, executive director of Louisiana CASA, and Laurie Johnson, executive director of CASA Mississippi, say that major population shifts in both states in the wake of the storms have increased caseloads and demand for CASA volunteer services in areas well beyond the hurricanes' range. Volunteer recruitment remains a high priority.

CASA programs in both states continue to incorporate the lessons of Katrina and Rita. "Before Katrina, we really

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These images give a clear idea of the devastation caused by Hurricane Ike.

in affected areas did the same, locating their kids quickly and efficiently.

Mona King, program manager for Voices for Children, the Galveston County CASA program, says she has been deeply moved by the volunteers' tenacity. "Before the storm, we had 35 to 40 active volunteers serving about 48 kids," she says. "Almost all our volunteers stayed with us—and many of them lost everything."

Ike surprised everyone when its massive storm surge traveled through an inland waterway, overcoming a levee and flooding the cities of Orange and Bridge City and the surrounding areas. Jane Stevenson, executive director of Advocates for Children, Inc., which is based in Orange and serves seven counties, had moved computers from the office floor onto desks the day before the storm, "never dreaming that what I was doing was so significant," she says. When she was allowed back inside the building more than a week later, she

discovered that seawater had flooded the office nearly to the desktops, sparing the computers—and their precious data—but damaging beyond repair almost everything else.

In Bridge City, where many volunteers live, just 14 of 5,000 homes were spared flood damage, says Stevenson. "But volunteers never missed a beat," she adds. One volunteer whose house was not damaged took in 17 relatives—and she still managed to stay on top of her CASA volunteer case.

Texas CASA programs struggling to recover from Hurricane Ike are working to recruit more volunteers. And with the next hurricane season just half a year away, they are creating disaster plans to help them weather the next storm.

For more information about CASA volunteer opportunities in Texas, visit the Texas CASA volunteer information site: [becomeacasa.org](http://becomeacasa.org).



couldn't fathom what could happen in a situation like this," says Johnson. "We found most of our kids quickly, but that was really lucky."

Both states' CASA organizations have strengthened their disaster plans, placing a heavy emphasis on communications and records management. Louisiana already had an opportunity to test its emergency communication plan when Hurricane Gustav threatened the coast in September.

## Giving Corner: Double Your Donation in One Easy Step



Many companies match their employees' philanthropic donations dollar for dollar, which is great news for employees—and for the National CASA Association. When you submit a matching gift form with your donation,

you give your employer the opportunity to invest in you, not just as a staff member but as a person with a passion to make life better for kids. To find out if your employer has a matching gift policy, check with your human resources administrator or visit [matchinggifts.com](http://matchinggifts.com). For more information about matching gifts, go to [nationalcasa.org/donate/workplace.html](http://nationalcasa.org/donate/workplace.html).

**NEW!**

**Visit National CASA online at our new web address: [casaforchildren.org](http://casaforchildren.org)**

## Local Program Partnerships: Kohl's "Flocks" for CASA

Imagine this: You arrive home from work on a summer evening, and you're just firing up the grill when a pickup truck pulls up. Five familiar folks from your local Kohl's department store jump out, plant a large flock of plastic pink flamingos on your lawn, jump back into the pickup and disappear, leaving only a note: "Congratulations—you've just been flocked." The next day, they return, pack up the birds and leave.

Flocks of flamingos have been landing on lawns in and around La Crosse, WI, each summer for the past three years for the benefit of the La Crosse YWCA CASA for Kids program. For a \$30 donation to CASA for Kids, local residents can order the 24-hour "flocking" of a friend's or neighbor's yard. Flamingo season runs about a month, and last year the event raised \$5,500 for CASA for Kids.



*Flocks of plastic flamingos have La Crosse residents thinking pink—and supporting their local CASA program.*

"This is all in fun, and we get a terrific reaction from people who are flocked," says Ruthann Schultz, program director for the La Crosse YWCA CASA for Kids. "We have great volunteer road crews from many

local businesses, but we wouldn't be nearly as successful without Kohl's."

That's where the Kohl's A-Team volunteer program comes in. A-Teams are groups of five or more Kohl's associates who volunteer a minimum of three hours to benefit kids in their communities. For each A-Team activity, Kohl's donates \$500 to the organization for which they volunteer. Last summer the La Crosse Kohl's deployed four A-Teams of flamingo flockers, netting \$2,000 for CASA for Kids.

For more information about the Kohl's A-Team program, visit [kohlscorporation.com](http://kohlscorporation.com). To learn how you can connect with a Kohl's A-Team in your community, contact Kris Gonzales at 800 628-3233, ext. 265, or [kris@nationalcasa.org](mailto:kris@nationalcasa.org).

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## Legislation News: National CASA Works with Congress on Passage of Landmark Foster Care Reform



National CASA Deputy CEO Carmela Welte can't stop smiling when she talks about the landmark foster care reform legislation signed into law in October, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. "I'm crazy about this legislation," says Welte. "It's not about numbers and timelines. It is about improving outcomes for kids living in foster care."

The act, which passed both houses of Congress by unanimous consent, provides what Welte calls "a series of building blocks" that will help hundreds of thousands of children and youth in foster care. The law enables grandparents and other relatives to be compensated as legal guardians for

children, helps siblings stay together and increases adoption incentives for older children and those with special needs. It also addresses school stability and health care, and it extends federal support to American Indian children who are removed from their homes and cared for in tribal communities.

But the provision that makes Welte grin widest extends federal support for youth in foster care to age 21. That's the one that National CASA helped save.

Last June, when National CASA coordinated a Capitol Hill Day at the conclusion of its training conference in Washington, DC, competing bills were winding their way through the House and the Senate. "We knew what both chambers were considering, and the provision for older youth was missing from the Senate draft," says Welte. "So we made that the focus of our advocacy efforts." Close to 600 CASA program staff members and volunteers from around the country visited 400 congressional offices, educating members of Congress and Capitol Hill staffers about the needs of youth who leave foster care at age 18.

Two weeks later, the House of Representatives passed a bill that included the option for states to receive federal support if they elect to extend foster care to age 21; the final House-Senate compromise bill also embraced these vulnerable older youth. As the bill's House sponsor, Jim McDermott (D-WA), told fellow members, "No parents I know abandon their children at age 18, and yet that is what our federal policy for foster care does." The new law provides the opportunity for states to change that beginning October 1, 2010, and provides financial support from the federal government to do so.

In addition to McDermott, the legislation was championed by Representative Jerry Weller (R-IL) and Senators Max Baucus (D-MT), Charles Grassley (R-IA), Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY).

"The advocates who fanned out during National CASA's Capitol Hill Day should be very proud," says Welte, as she smiles again. "They laid the groundwork to make sure we take care of these kids."

## Volunteer Spotlight: Coming Through the Storm



There's something you need to understand about Russ Rehm: The guy does not give up easily. Not on New Orleans, where he has lived all his life. Not on his home, destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Not on the kids he serves as a CASA volunteer.

"After Katrina, people's lives were in ruins," says Dellona Davis, executive director of CASA New Orleans, which named Russ its 2008 Volunteer of the Year. "Russ was living in a trailer, and he was still [working] his cases because he is truly committed to the children in our community."

Russ, who is 54 and single, became an advocate in 2003 after reading about CASA New Orleans in a newspaper op-ed. He called right away, attended training and, as he puts it, "The next thing I knew, I had a case."

He has had three cases in the six tumultuous years since he became a CASA volunteer. The first closed when the child, an infant, found a safe, permanent home. The third is still active. And the one in the middle, the one Russ calls "the kid who got away," was nearly washed away by Hurricane Katrina.

Marcus (not his real name) was in trouble with the law when he entered foster care at age 16. He was a runner, frequently going AWOL from his group home. Russ stood by Marcus's side in juvenile court as well as family court, and kept tabs on him the best he could when the youth was on the run. He stayed focused on preparing Marcus for the world that was waiting just beyond his 18th birthday, compiling a casebook of reference material to, he says, "keep on a shelf and use when he aged out." Russ also discovered a promising apprenticeship opportunity for Marcus at Café Reconcile, a food-service vocational-training program for kids at risk.

When Marcus returned to care after being arrested once again, Russ sat him down for a serious talk about the future. "I told him he was a candidate for Café Reconcile, but that he needed to interview for the position and make a commitment to stay in the group home." Marcus said he was ready. He interviewed on August 23, 2005, while Russ waited outside. They celebrated together when he was accepted on the spot and assigned to a September training class. But Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on August 29. "That changed everything," says Russ.

Russ evacuated to Houston, but he had no idea where Marcus had gone. For two weeks, he tried to reach Marcus's caseworker, therapist, probation officer or anyone else in a child welfare system that had ceased to function. Finally, he called the Louisiana Department of Social Services and found a sympathetic ear. Two days later, the man from DSS called back: By a stroke of luck, he had located Marcus in Baton

Rouge. Russ went there the next day.

The plan for Marcus quickly fell apart around him. There was no future in New Orleans, no Café Reconcile. And he was running out of time. In January 2006—over four months after Hurricane Katrina—Marcus turned 18 and aged out of foster care. He got on a bus to Texas and disappeared from Russ's life. The state of Louisiana closed his case.

Russ, who lost everything but the car he drove to Houston, had returned to New Orleans in October 2005. He lived on friends' couches and in rental apartments until his FEMA trailer arrived. Then he moved in and began the arduous work of restoring his home—and his life. When CASA New Orleans reopened a few months later, the storm had swept away all but a handful of its advocates. Russ did not hesitate to take on a new case immediately. "There was another kid out there who needed me," he says. "And you know what? There'll be another one after that."

Dellona Davis says the situation in New Orleans is still discouraging. The storm drove away caregivers and closed group homes, creating a severe shortage of foster homes. But CASA New Orleans is recovering. Its handful of volunteer advocates has grown to more than 120 as the community embraces its most vulnerable children. Russ's new case "is going great," he says. No matter that the kid lives in a group home 300 miles from New Orleans. Russ makes the 11-hour round-trip drive at least once a month.

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## Partner Spotlight: For Mother's Day or Any Day!



**New!**

Visit [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org) in early May for a new custom jewelry piece from our partner Fred Meyer/Littman Jewelers.

*Fred Meyer* **JEWELERS**  
"For All Those Special Times™"

Purchase the CASA Sunflower Bouquet for Mother's Day (or any item) from our partner Organic Bouquet using the link found on the National CASA website, [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org), and 10% of the purchase price will support our mission to provide volunteer advocacy for abused and neglected children.

**ORGANIC  
BOUQUET**





## Rolling Up Our Sleeves: A Message from National CASA CEO Michael Piraino

On Tuesday, January 20, I joined 1.8 million people on the National Mall in Washington, DC, to see a new president inaugurated.

On the way into town, my cab driver, an Ethiopian immigrant, set the tone for the week. "This town is happy," he said. "Everywhere are happy people. All happy together." He planned to take his teenage son with him to witness the event. He wanted his son to know why he is an American and what values that represents.

That theme of happiness echoed all around on Inauguration Day. It was an energetic, diverse and friendly crowd. Everywhere I looked, flags waved. Strangers hugged. You couldn't do anything in DC that week without making new friends. Almost two million people crowded onto the mall and there was not a single arrest. Amazing.

But I saw and heard something even more profound that cold January week. The people on the mall and the policymakers on the Capitol steps were all ready to roll up their sleeves and get on with the hard work of solving big problems. Whatever

people's political persuasion, a strong spirit of service enveloped us all.

Of course, I took advantage of that spirit to recruit some volunteers. It wasn't hard. Within 30 minutes of passing through security, I had six new CASA volunteers.

This spirit of service dovetailed beautifully with the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday the day before. Calls had gone out for a national day of service. In announcing the "Renew America Together" initiative, Colin Powell said he hoped the enthusiasm of the day would inspire Americans to finally rise to meet the holiday's promise. Under the new administration, volunteer service by ordinary Americans will play an important role in addressing major national issues. That sounds like CASA.

Advocates for the nation's abused and neglected children need to harness this spirit of the moment for the long-term benefit of the children. Here's one idea a colleague has proposed: Let's end child abuse within three generations. It's a long road, but it's a journey I would like to take.

There is plenty of hard work to do right now to move down that road. Reports suggest that the economic collapse is

already contributing to an increase in child maltreatment. Many families are now stressed beyond their ability to cope. In times like this, more is demanded of us. The National CASA Association has embraced an ambitious strategic goal of helping 300,000 children this year, but even this will leave a half-million children without a CASA or guardian ad litem volunteer.

This is why we need you with us for the long haul. As Judge Glenda Hatchett often says, we're working today for the children's children. We will need all hands on deck—donors, volunteer advocates, staff and board members—to do the long-term work that will assure all children are safe and loved. I am extremely grateful that you share my commitment to these precious children.

Support for your help in this cause extends far beyond our shores. While I was in Washington in January, I received an email from a Lebanese friend who lives near Beirut: "All the best to you and to all people who work for peace and the welfare of humanity."

Amen to that.

## Anna Quindlen and Judge Hatchett Speak Out for National CASA in NYC



From left to right, Michael Piraino, Anna Quindlen, Julia Charles and Judge Hatchett.

Anna Quindlen, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and best-selling novelist, moderated a panel discussion at a luncheon that National CASA sponsored for journalists in New York City on January 15. Joining her to discuss the results of a new opinion poll about attitudes toward foster kids were Judge Glenda Hatchett, past chief presiding judge of the Fulton County, GA, Juvenile Court and current host of the syndicated show, *Judge Hatchett*; Julia Charles, author of *Surviving the Storm: The Life of a Child in Foster Care*, which chronicles her harrowing journey from her days in North Carolina's foster care system to her college graduation last year; and National CASA CEO Michael Piraino.

## 28th Annual National CASA Conference: April 25–28, 2009



### Taking Advocacy to a Higher Level

Sheraton Denver Hotel, Denver, CO

The 1,400 CASA volunteers and staff members who head to Denver April 25–28 will take part in an intensive learning experience—ranging from workshops taught by leaders in their fields to discussions on timely topics. Both experienced and newly trained CASA/GAL program staff and volunteer advocates will leave with fresh skills and a renewed commitment to the goal of ensuring every child has a safe, permanent home.

#### For more information or to register:

- Visit [casanet.org/conference](http://casanet.org/conference) before March 20, 2009
- Call our conference hotline: 800-628-3233, ext. 224
- Email conference staff at [ncasa-reg@nationalcasa.org](mailto:ncasa-reg@nationalcasa.org)

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"You've been flocked!" Read about one local program's creative fundraising partnership.

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Russ Rehm doesn't let anything get in the way of his work as a CASA volunteer—not even Hurricane Katrina.

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National CASA CEO Michael Piraino on the spirit of service.

## Volunteer Voices

When the going gets tough, what keeps you going as a CASA volunteer?



*I always focus on why I am a CASA volunteer in the first place, which is to help a child who is not in a position to help him- or herself.*

Bob Janesko  
Pittsburgh, PA  
CASA of Allegheny County



*On a bad day I'll wonder why I keep doing this work. Then I remember that if I don't advocate for these children, nobody else will. That thought always keeps me going.*

Laura Haywood  
Juneau, AK  
Juneau CASA Program



*Caseworkers change all the time. I am the one constant in the child's life. I have been there since the beginning of the case and, God willing, I plan to be there until the end.*

Shelia Smith  
Denver, CO  
Child Advocates  
Denver CASA



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